

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 972

UD 025 586

AUTHOR Hochschild, Jennifer L.
TITLE The Double-Edged Sword of Equal Educational Opportunity.
PUB DATE 15 Apr 87
NOTE 41p.; Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Washington, DC, April 22, 1987).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - General (140) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black Education; *Blacks; *Equal Opportunities (Jobs); Ethnic Groups; *Ideology; Racial Relations; *Social Mobility; Social Values; *United States History

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the ideology of equal opportunity is simultaneously a message of hope and despair, that equal opportunity is a double-edged sword both empirically and normatively. The essay is organized in three sections. The first outlines the growing role played by equal opportunity in American history, thought, and practice, and indicates the time when five different problems associated with equal opportunity first surfaced. They are: (1) the promotion of equal opportunity for one group denying access to it by another group; (2) equal chances for all turning into a denial of chances for some; (3) the success of some group members creating or exacerbating the failure of other members of the group; (4) dangers created by the strength of the ideology of equal opportunity; and (5) the success of equal opportunity creates anxiety about its continuance. Section 2 asserts that these five problems, which different groups of whites faced one at a time across 150 years, are all occurring at the same time within the contemporary black community. It argues that the status of black Americans is extraordinarily complex and fluid because blacks are recapitulating in one generation the successes and risks of many generations of whites. Section 3 identifies conditions under which a reliance on equal opportunity is more likely to produce benign rather than malign results. The analysis focuses on the education of American blacks, but more general implications are discussed. (KH)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED282972

THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD OF EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

Jennifer L. Hochschild

Princeton University

April 15, 1987

Paper presented at annual meeting of the American Education Research Association, Washington D.C., April 22, 1987

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

UD 025586

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jennifer L. Hochschild
Princeton Univ.

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy

Equal opportunity -- modernity's less-than-mellifluous synonym of Thomas Jefferson's "inalienable right to...the pursuit of happiness" -- is the keystone of American liberal democracy. It performs the crucial ideological work of bridging the gap between the promise of political and social equality and the fact of economic inequality. The belief in equal opportunity to attain wealth lies behind economists' faith in free markets; the search for equal opportunity to attain political ends motivates political scientists' specification of the conditions for pluralist governance. Americans, in short, believe in equal opportunity, constantly seek to demonstrate its operation, and pin their hopes for their children on its continuance.

Political leaders, academic analysts, and ordinary citizens alike see education, especially universal free public education, to be crucial to the exercise of equal opportunity in marketplace and polity. Thomas Jefferson believed that only through public schools are "worth and genius...sought out from every condition of life;"¹ Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the "profitable lesson... that in this country, one can scarcely be so poor, but that, if he will, he can acquire sufficient education to get through the world respectably;"² Herbert Hoover proclaimed that "we, through free and universal education, provide the training of the runners; we give to them an equal start; we provide in government the umpire in the race."³ Theorists from Rousseau to Amy Gutmann insist that education of the right kind is necessary if not sufficient to produce democratic citizens,⁴ and researchers seek to demonstrate that the American educational system has met the theorists' challenge.⁵ Respondents to public opinion surveys see education as a necessary and appropriately distributed component of social and economic opportunity.⁶

1. Thomas Jefferson, ??

2. Quoted in Stephen Oates, Abraham Lincoln (New York: New American Library, 1984), p. 59.

3. Herbert Hoover, American Individualism (New York: Doubleday, Doran, and Co., 1928), p. ??.

4. Jean Jacques Rousseau, Emile or, On Education, trans. Barbara Foxley (New York: Everyman, 1972); Amy Gutmann, Democratic Education (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

5. For example, Lawrence Cremin, American Education: The National Experience, 1783-1876 (New York: Harper, 1980), and The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957 (New York: Vintage, 1964).

6. For example, 82% of respondents in the 1984 General Social Survey agreed that "America has an open society. What one achieves in life no longer depends on one's family background, but on the abilities one has and the education one acquires." 70% of the same sample agreed that "everyone in this country has an opportunity to obtain an education corresponding to their abilities and talents." James Davis and Tom Smith, General Social Surveys,

The concept of equal educational opportunity does, of course, have critics. Some worry that particular economic strata or social groups have too little of it;⁷ others assert that the nation has too much of it or that we would regret having more of it.⁸ Some claim that education cannot live up to the claims we make for it;⁹ still others claim that the whole "metaphor is a mess."¹⁰

This paper seeks to unite the critics with the cheerleaders -- to show how the ideology of equal opportunity is simultaneously a message of hope and despair, and how the practice of equal educational opportunity simultaneously opens and closes doors. That is, I do not take sides in the perennial debates between egalitarian and libertarian philosophers, or between class and stratification analysts. It seems more fruitful to figure out how all of these scholars can be right than to decide which large group of them is wrong. My purpose, then, is to show how equal opportunity is a double-edged sword both empirically and normatively.¹¹

1972-1985: Cumulative Codebook (Chicago: University of Chicago, National Opinion Research Center, 1985).

7. Claims of this variety about education include Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Schooling in Capitalist America (New York: Basic Books, 1976); Michael Katz, Class, Bureaucracy, and the Schools (New York: Praeger, 1975). See also Joel Spring, Education and the Rise of the Corporate State (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

8. Michael Young, The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2033 (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1975); Kurt Vonnegut, "Harrison Bergeron" in Welcome to the Monkey House (New York: Delacorte Press, 1968): 7-13; Bertrand Russell, Authority and the Individual (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), e.g. pp. 26, 47, 49, 57; James Fishkin, Justice, Equal Opportunity, and the Family (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). Empirical manifestations of "too much" equal opportunity are usually described as "creaming", in the context of magnet schools, job training programs, and admission to elite universities.

9. Christopher Jencks et al., Inequality (New York: Basic Books, 1972).

10. Garry Wills, Nixon Agonistes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), p. 236, Part V, passim. See, in addition, Christopher Jencks, "What Must Be Equal for Opportunity to Be Equal?" Ethics, forthcoming 1987; Douglas Rae et al., Equalities (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), chapter 4.

11. I should confess up front that I have no clear definition of equal opportunity. Although I am trying to unite the critics and the cheerleaders, I am not attempting to respond to the analytic claim that the whole idea is incoherent, because I think in the final analysis that that is correct. Any definition must make ultimately arbitrary choices about when opportunities must start, how often they are to be equalized, what counts as equality, what counts as an opportunity, how extensive the equalized opportunities must be, and so on. Instead of making such choices and embarking on the elaborate discussion

I pursue this purpose in three steps. The first is a quick tour through American history to suggest the growing role played by equal opportunity in our thought and practice, and to identify when five different defects associated with the virtues of equal opportunity first surfaced. The second and longest section argues that these five problems, which different groups of whites faced one at a time across 150 years, are all occurring at the same time within the contemporary black community. The status of black Americans is extraordinarily complex and fluid because blacks are recapitulating in one generation the successes and risks of many generations of whites. The final, too-brief section begins to identify conditions under which a reliance on equal opportunity is more likely to produce benign than malign results. The analysis focuses on the education of American blacks, but it can be generalized beyond education,¹² and perhaps beyond blacks' particularly problematic situation.

THE RISE OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

Most framers were not especially concerned about equal opportunity. Neither the phrase nor any eighteenth century synonyms occur, to my knowledge, in The Federalist Papers or anti-Federalist essays, and it is prominent in few Revolutionary documents except the Declaration of Independence itself.¹³ With

needed to defend them, I prefer to leave the term ambiguous and to let its usage provide an intuitive definition. At a minimum, equal opportunity requires the legal right of all citizens to take the (legally permitted) actions they deem necessary to pursue happiness; at a maximum, equal opportunity requires constant redistribution of most important resources, thereby blurring into "equality of results" (an equally ambiguous term).

12. This paper, in fact, is a variant, particularly focussed on the issue of education, of a longer paper I have written looking more generally at the effects of equal opportunity on blacks. The broader paper is available to interested readers, in exchange for comments and suggestions.

13. The concept was not, of course, unheard of; Hector St. John de Crevecoeur wrote "After a foreigner from any part of Europe is arrived and become a citizen, let him devoutly listen to the voice of our great parent, which says to him, 'Welcome to my shores, distressed European; bless the hour in which thou didst see my verdant fields, my fair navigable rivers, and my green mountains! If thou wilt work, I have bread for thee; if thou wilt be honest, sober, and industrious, I have greater rewards to confer on thee -- ease and independence....Go thou and work and till; thou shalt prosper, provided thou be just, grateful, and industrious.'" Letters from an American Farmer (New York: Penguin Books, 1981 [1782]), pp. 89-90. Benjamin Franklin, characteristically, said the same thing in fewer and more pungent words: "In America,...people do not inquire concerning a Stranger, What is he? but, What can he do?" Benjamin Franklin, "Information to Those Who Would Remove to America", in Works, vol. 8, ed. John Bigelow (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1888 [1782]), p. 175.

Jefferson paid more attention to education, as well as to the need for

twentieth century hindsight, we can see why. Political equality did not sharply diverge from economic inequality in 1800 for two reasons. First, if we follow the framers in ignoring women and slaves, the United States was one of the most economically equal nations in the Western world.¹⁴ Second, the poorest (white, male) citizens were not granted the franchise in any case. Thus the politically relevant citizenry shared similar economic means, so the concept of equal opportunity, while attractive, did not hold center stage.

Equal opportunity attained greater importance during the Jacksonian era, when capitalism, urbanization, and industrialization began to sharply differentiate rich from poor at the same time that the (white, male) poor attained the franchise. Suddenly the discrepancy between actual economic inequality and purported political equality became considerable, visible, and dangerous. Leaders like Andrew Jackson and William Leggett, author of the highly influential Democratick Editorials,¹⁵ began to distinguish between the parasitic "aristocratic sores" and the "real people" who worked, produced, and -- in a well-ordered society -- attained the status they so richly deserved. Calls for universal free public education as a way to ensure opportunities became widespread and urgent. Horace Mann led the way: "education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men -- the balance wheel of the social machinery."¹⁶

Within a few decades, Abraham Lincoln inadvertently made clear for the first time not only how central equal opportunity is to Americans but also how problematic it can be. He decried the moral evil of slavery but opposed immediate emancipation because he feared that the influx of black workers into the economy, especially of the West, would jeopardize the chances of poor whites to attain jobs and land. As he put it, "the whole nation is interested that the best use shall be made of these [Western] territories. We want them for the homes of free white people.... Slave states are places for poor white people to remove from; not to remove to. New free states are the places for poor people to go to and better their condition." More generally, he feared that abolition would destroy the Union, which "gave promise [to the rest of the world] that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all

equal opportunity more generally, than almost all other framers did. For example, he continued the comment quoted above by asserting that only universal public education will "raise the mass of people to the high ground of moral responsibility necessary to their own safety and to orderly government."

14. See J. Franklin Jameson, The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967 [1926]); and especially Jeffrey Williamson and Peter Lindert, American Inequality: A Macroeconomic History (New York: Academic Press, 1980), chapters 2 and 3.

15. William Leggett, Democratick Editorials (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1984), e.g. "True Functions of Government" (pp. 3-7); "Rich and Poor" (pp. 246-249); "The Inequality of Human Condition" (pp. 254-257).

16. Horace Mann, Annual Reports on Education (Boston: Lee and Shephard, 1872), p. ? [1848 report].

men, and ... all should have an equal chance." Thus he continued to insist well into the Civil War that "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so." Opportunity for some could come only at the expense of opportunity for even more disadvantaged others.¹⁷

As the United States approached its third historic commitment, to corporate capitalism,¹⁸ Social Darwinists pressed very hard on the ideology of equal opportunity to justify huge and increasing material disparities among citizens as well as opposition to governmental restraint on "private" activity. They thereby demonstrated a second problem of equal opportunity: absent careful hedging, it can be used to legitimate any action that promotes self-interest so long as others have an equal legal right to take the same action. Henry Ward Beecher made the point in dignified language: "The real democratic American idea is, not that every man shall be on a level with every other man, but that every man shall have liberty to be what God made him, without hindrance."¹⁹ George Plunkitt, the leader of Tammany Hall, expressed the same idea rather

17. Thomas H. Williams, Abraham Lincoln: Selected Speeches, Messages, and Letters (New York: Rinehart, 1957), Speech at Peoria, Illinois, Oct. 16, 1854, p. 49; Speech in Philadelphia, February 22, 1861, p. 137; First Inaugural Address, quoting one of his previous speeches, March 4, 1861, pp. 138-139.

18. Robert Dahl, "On Removing Certain Impediments to Democracy in the United States," Political Science Quarterly 92, No. 1 (Spring 1977):1-20. The first two commitments were to a liberal constitutional system of rights and a political system of democracy.

19. William Drysdale, ed., Proverbs from Plymouth Pulpit (New York: D. Appleton, 1887), p. 71.

William Graham Sumner spelled out this philosophy in more detail and with impressive tough-mindedness: "We each owe it to the other to guarantee rights. Rights do not pertain to results but only to chances. They pertain to the conditions of the struggle for existence, not to any of the results of it; to the pursuit of happiness, not to the possession of happiness.... This, however, [i.e. equal rights] will not produce equal results, but it is right just because it will produce unequal results -- that is, results which shall be proportioned to the merits of individuals.... If there be liberty, some will profit by the chances eagerly and some will neglect them altogether. Therefore, the greater the chances the more unequal will be the fortune of these two sets of men. So it ought to be, in all justice and right reason." In fact, Sumner argues, those who fail economically warrant political equality no more than material equality: "A man who is present as a consumer, yet who does not contribute either by land, labor, or capital to the work of society, is a burden. On no sound political theory ought such a person to share in the political power of the State. ... Society must support him. It accepts the burden, but he must be cancelled from the ranks of the rulers likewise. So much for the pauper. About him no more need be said." What Social Classes Owe to Each Other (Caldwell, Idaho: 1974 [1883], pp. 141, 145, ? (emphasis in original)).

more bluntly: "There's an honest graft, and I'm an example of how it works. I might sum up the whole thing by sayin': 'I seen my opportunities and I took 'em'."20

The turn of the century demonstrated for the first time a third double-edged quality of equal opportunity. Some immigrant Irish, for example, were able to pull away from their pasts of potato famine, steerage transport to the Boston slums, and sweatshop labor into middle class respectability and even the heights of Andrew Carnegie.²¹ They became "lace-curtain Irish,"²² scornful of and anxious to distinguish themselves from their less successful countrymen. German Jews demonstrated the same distaste for poorer and less assimilated Eastern European Jews,²³ as did well-off northern for southern Italians. Not surprisingly, those left behind developed reciprocal hostilities. In addition, social reformers began worrying that families remaining in the slums would be unable to improve their situation, since impressionable children were growing up surrounded by failures and out of touch with success stories. Benefits for some members of a group, it began to appear, coincided with harm to others in the same group, either psychologically, socially, or both.

As more Americans came to see how many people were being burned by the Great Barbecue (as Mark Twain dubbed the late nineteenth century), equal opportunity acquired a more benign caste. Progressives began to focus on the enormous discrepancies between the promise of political equality and the fact that the distribution of wealth in the United States was among the most unequal in the Western world.²⁴ They turned their attention to the first word of the phrase, arguing that people must be granted at least a minimal set of resources to have any opportunity to acquire more. Feminists stressed the need to break

20. William Riordan, Plunkitt of Tammany Hall (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1963), p. 3.

21. One anecdote will suggest the pride of the self-made immigrant. Cyril Connolly wrote to a friend in 1930: "I came to America tourist Third with a cheque for ten pounds and I leave plus five hundred, a wife, a mandarin coat, a set of diamond studs, a state room and bath, and a decent box for the ferret. That's what everybody comes to America to do and I don't think I've managed badly for a beginner." Letter to Noel Blakiston, April 2, 1930, quoted in Joseph R. Conlin, The Morrow Book of Quotations in American History (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), p. 73.

22. See Stephen Birmingham's colorful if rather casual book, Real Lace (New York: Harper and Row, 1973). For more scholarly descriptions of the same phenomenon, see Stanley Lieberman, A Piece of the Pie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Stephen Thernstrom, Poverty and Progress (New York: Atheneum, 1970).

23. See two others of Stephen Birmingham's books, Our Crowd (New York: Berkley, 1985) and The Rest of Us (New York: Berkley, 1985).

24. Williamson and Lindert, American Inequality, chapter 4.

the links between economic inequality and political domination;²⁵ social workers limned the impossible conditions of the urban poor.²⁶ In this changed atmosphere, Herbert Croly pointed out a fourth danger of the promise of equal opportunity: if not fulfilled, it can backfire on the polity that promises it. In his words,

A considerable proportion of the American people is beginning to exhibit economic and political, as well as personal, discontent. A generation ago the implication was that if a man remained poor and needy, his poverty was his own fault, because the American system was giving all its citizens a fair chance. Now, however, the discontented poor are beginning to charge their poverty to an unjust political and economic organization, and reforming agitators do not hesitate to support them in this contention. Manifestly a threatened obstacle has been raised against the anticipated realization of our national Promise. Unless the great majority of American not only have, but believe they have, a fair chance, the better American future will be dangerously compromised.²⁷

The danger to political and economic stability posed by the Depression was, of course, averted by the widespread perception and partial achievement of federal programs to prevent personal disaster from following structural failure. The creation of the American welfare state, however, set the stage for the conditions discussed in this paper: blacks were almost entirely excluded from the flagship program of Social Security, and largely excluded from the less prestigious welfare programs.²⁸ A necessary political compromise of the 1930s exacerbated already severe economic and social inequalities, and came home to roost in the 1960s and 1970s.

25. See, for example, Mary Putnam Jacobi: "Until, practically, to-day the inequalities of political rights have been along lines of social class distinction. The well-born, the powerful, the educated, the rich have ruled. The poor, the ignorant, the helpless have submitted." Address to Committee on Suffrage, New York State Constitutional Convention, 1894, quoted in Alpheus Mason and Gordon Baker, Free Government in the Making (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 551.

26. Jane Addams, Twenty Years at Hull House (New York: New American Library, 1960 [1910]); J.A. Riis, How the Other Half Lives (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957 [1890]); for an early secondary analysis that captures some of the flavor of the Progressive reformers, see Harold Faulkner, The Quest for Social Justice (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1959 [1931]).

27. The Promise of American Life, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1963 [1909]), p. 20.

28. See Theda Skocpol, "The Limits of the New Deal System and the Roots of Contemporary Welfare Dilemmas," in Margaret Weir, Ann Orloff, and Theda Skocpol, eds. The Politics of Social Policy in the United States (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming 1987).

Current political and economic circumstances provide the fifth and final manifestation of the double-edged quality of equal opportunity. As Americans have come to believe that opportunities are not infinitely expandable, that growth is slowing and perhaps even reversing, equal opportunity has once again taken on a hard edge. We hear increasing talk of zero-sum games and limits to growth, in contexts ranging from affirmative action in higher education to industrial relocation to population policy.²⁹ Middle class children worry, perhaps correctly, that they will not increase their standard of living as much as their parents did. College students major in business administration rather than art history, and see education as a means to earn more money rather than an opportunity to find themselves.³⁰ The national passion for progress -- the hidden premise of equal opportunity -- is becoming a national imperative that increasingly "disciplines" people into "stripping down for action."³¹ A once liberating idea now produces anxiety and constraint.

We have, at this point, a suggestion of why equal opportunity became so central to American beliefs by the twentieth century, and why researchers spend so much time trying to prove its existence or improve its reach. So long as we live in a liberal democratic capitalist society -- that is, so long as we maintain the formal promise of political and social equality while encouraging the practice of economic inequality -- we need the idea of equal opportunity to bridge that otherwise unacceptable contradiction. Pluralism promises, not equal power, but a sufficient opportunity for all citizens to attain their ends through a combination of free elections, dispersed resources, and players willing to follow the rules of the game. The free market promises, not equal wealth, but sufficient opportunity for all workers to attain their ends through a combination of trade, labor, and savings. A free universal public education system is supposed to teach us how to be good and effective citizens, and how to earn our way and improve our position in the marketplace. The more our

29. See Lester Thurow, The Zero-Sum Society (New York: Penguin, 1981); Fred Hirsch, Social Limits to Growth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); E.F. Schumacher, Small is Beautiful (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

30. On the first point: "in 1985, almost one freshman in four planned to major in business (24.8 percent), up from 14.3 percent in 1966. Similarly, the proportion planning to pursue business careers more than doubled during this same period, from 11.6 to 23.9 percent.... Student interest in humanities majors experienced a significant decline over the past 20 years." On the second point: "over the past 20 years student endorsement of this value ["being very well-off financially"] has increased dramatically from 43.8 percent to 70.9 percent of the entering freshmen." In contrast, the proportion who seek to "develop a meaningful philosophy of life" has declined from 83 percent in 1966 to 44 percent in 1986." Cooperative Institutional Research Program, "New Report Tracks 20 Year Shift in Freshman Attitudes, Values, and Life Goals" (Los Angeles: UCLA, American Council of Education, undated; c. fall 1986.)

31. I owe the phrase and general idea to William Connolly, in a conversation at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey, January 27, 1987.

ideals diverge from one another, and from practice, the more we rely on equal opportunity -- especially but not only in education -- for the ideology and personal resources to pull the loose strands together.

We also have by this time five suggestions about how equal opportunity cuts both ways empirically and normatively. In order of their historical appearance, we have seen 1) Lincoln's problem, in which the promotion of equal opportunity for one group denies access to it by another group; 2) the problem of social Darwinism, in which an equal chance for all turns into a denial of any chance for some; 3) the problem of the lace-curtain Irish, in which the success of equal opportunity for some members of a group creates or exacerbates its failure for other members of the same group; 4) Croly's problem, in which the very strength of the ideology of equal opportunity creates a great danger; and 5) the Yuppies' problem, in which the prior and even current success of equal opportunity creates anxieties about its continuance.

We can now go on to examine the workings of this curiously ambiguous idea within the black community and between blacks and whites. Only then can we consider the conditions under which its virtues might outweigh its flaws, in the hopes of avoiding the alternative.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND AMERICAN BLACKS

My contention in this section is that all five variants of equal opportunity's double-edged nature that surfaced at different periods in American history come together in the contemporary circumstance of American blacks. Blacks have finally gained access to the joys and promises of equal opportunity, but they have also acquired all of its risks and flaws. To put the point differently, the possibilities and dangers that were spread across one hundred fifty years and many separate segments of the white race are now concentrated in one generation and one relatively small group, the black race. Individual blacks may predominantly experience the joys, or the defeats, or both; blacks as a group are experiencing all the ambiguities embedded in the exercise of equal opportunity all at once.

No wonder, if this contention is correct, that up to now no one has gotten a handle on whether, how, or how much blacks are now better off than they used to be. They are better off in some ways and worse off in others; some are better off and others worse off. Relative changes show different patterns from absolute changes; comparisons among blacks lead to different conclusions than comparisons between blacks and whites; perceptions of change tell a different story from statistical indicators of change.

The Lace-Curtain Irish Problem: Success for Some in a Group Hurts Others

Let us begin to make sense of this muddle through the phenomenon of the "lace-curtain Irish" -- the issue of disparate rates of movement away from equal poverty within one ethnic group. Christopher Jencks and I are

investigating whether and how the dramatic improvement in blacks' legal and political status in the past twenty-five years has been accompanied by improvements in their economic and social status. More precisely, we are investigating the changing relationship between race and class since 1960.³² We use four sets of survey data to examine the strength of the connection between parents' and children's socioeconomic position, to compare the relative strength of those connections over time, and to see how those connections have changed over time for both races. The data sets are : 1) the 1962 survey of Occupational Changes in a Generation (OCG I); 2) the 1973 survey of Occupational Changes in a Generation (OCG II); 3) the combined 1972-1979 General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (GSS I); and 4) the combined 1980-1986 General Social Surveys (GSS II).³³ Each survey contains information on parents' (usually fathers') and children's (usually sons') education, occupation, and income; our chief task at this point is simply examining the relationships among these dimensions for the two races across generations.³⁴

32. I use the term "class" to denote intergenerational transfers of social and economic position, as measured by comparing parents' and children's income, education, and occupational status. I do not want to bring a lot of baggage about inherent class conflict, a labor theory of value, or other Marxist conceptions along with the word; I use it mainly to distinguish intergenerational transfers from intragenerational changes in social and economic position, for which I will use the term "socioeconomic status."

I want eventually, although not in this paper, to add the third dimension of power to the discussion of changing opportunities for blacks. Any advice on how to do so would be greatly appreciated.

33. OCG I was a survey conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census as a supplement to the March 1962 Current Population Survey. It included questions about fertility, education, employment, socioeconomic origins, residential background, and marital status, and was completed by a cross section of 20,700 adult civilian men. It included 1532 blacks. It was replicated by the Census Bureau (as OCG II) in 1973, with 33,613 respondents including 4656 blacks. See David Featherman and Robert Hauser, Opportunity and Change (New York: Academic Press, 1978), chapters 1 and 2 and Appendices A and B for descriptions of the two surveys.

GSS I and II are combinations of the annual General Social Surveys conducted by NORC since 1973. Our combined samples yield 10,546 respondents (including 1234 blacks) from 1972 through 1979, and 7765 respondents (including 1133 blacks) from 1980 through 1986. These samples, unlike those of the OCG, included adult women as well as men; the questions and response categories are analogous but not identical to those in the OCG. See General Social Surveys, 1972-1986: Cumulative Codebook (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 1986) for a description of the questions and samples.

34. More accurately, Professor Jencks is doing the examining, since I am not sophisticated in statistical techniques; in his formulation, "Jennifer reads and Sandy counts." This disclaimer intends not only to give Professor Jencks most of the credit for what I am about to report; it is also a way of referring methodological discussions to my co-author. Professor Jencks has not

Our first observation, which replicates hundreds of previous studies, is that blacks are worse off on all dimensions than whites.³⁵ They have less education, hold lower status jobs, and earn less money. They are, however, less badly off in the aggregate in the 1980s than they were in the 1960s. For example, black men averaged 8.18 years of education in 1963, and 10.26 years in 1973. Black men and women averaged 10.11 years in the 1970s, and 11.22 in the 1980s. White men started the 1960s with more years of education -- 11.11 in 1962 -- but increased their years of schooling less. Black men received on average 12.11 years in 1973; white men and women averaged 11.92 years in the 1970s, and 12.46 in the 1980s.³⁶

Our second observation, also not new, is that these improvements are especially the province of young workers. That point is almost redundant for education (unlike for income and occupational status) since most people complete their education in their early adulthood. Nevertheless, the figures sharpen the first observation about improving conditions among blacks. Black men who reached age 16 in the 1960s achieved 11.75 years of education compared to 6.76 years of education for blacks who reached age 16 in the 1920s, and only 4.41 years of schooling for the head of the family of blacks who reached age 16 in the 1920s. Again, whites show the same gains but to a lesser degree. Comparable figures for white men are 12.84 years of schooling for those reaching age 16 in the 1960s, 10.10 years for those reaching 16 in the 1920s, and 7.13 years for the head of the family of whites who reached 16 in the 1920s.³⁷

In short, in very global terms, adult blacks and especially the youngest among them seem to be slowly converging on whites in educational attainment.

read this paper, so he is not responsible for its interpretations or arguments. I am not even sure that he agrees with them.

35. For evidence on both the persistence or racial disadvantage and on its diminution, see, for example, Reynolds Farley, Blacks and Whites: Narrowing the Gap? (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); symposium in Review of Black Political Economy 10, No. 4 (Summer 1980); James Smith and Finis Welch, Closing the Gap: Forty Years of Economic Progress for Blacks (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1986).

36. The data for 1962 and 1973 are from OCG I and OCG II, and the data for the 1970s and 1980s are from GSS I and GSS II. See also David Featherman and Robert Hauser, "Changes in the Socioeconomic Stratification of the Races, 1962-1973," (Madison: University of Wisconsin, Center for Demography and Ecology, 1975), table 2, and Robert Hauser and David Featherman, "Equality of Schooling: Trends and Prospects," Sociology of Education 49 (April 1976):99-120.

37. These data are from OCG I and II. According to the GSS data, the sharp rise in amount of education for young blacks continued into the 1970s; black men and women reaching age 16 in the 1970s averaged 12.78 years of schooling. We do not yet have comparable data on young whites.

Since the heads of their families were almost all much worse off than whites' family heads, class (i.e. intergenerational transfer of status) does not explain the current distribution of schooling. Instead, equal opportunity -- which, whatever it means, is surely manifested in increasing achievement from a starting point of almost universal ignorance based solely on ascriptive characteristics -- seems to be operating.

The story so far is a happy one. Its problematic side appears only when we look beyond those moving aggregates to distributions within them. Of three distributive issues, two seem much more problematic than the third. The nonproblematic issue is increasing inequality within the black population in attainment of higher education. That is, as the standard deviation in total years of education for black men is declining (from 3.95 for those reaching age 16 in the 1920s to 2.39 for those reaching 16 in the 1960s), the standard deviation for years of higher education is increasing (from 0.85 for the oldest group to 1.21 for the youngest group). This spread is occurring at the same time that the average amount of higher education is increasing among blacks, from 0.19 years among men reaching age 16 in the 1920s to 0.61 for those reaching age 16 in the 1960s.³⁸

An improvement in some people's position does not logically imply a greater spread from top to bottom, but it is likely to do so empirically, and it certainly does so for the case of black higher education. Increasing inequality within a group seems to me *prima facie* undesirable. However, it would be silly to argue that equal ignorance is preferable to inequality caused by the fact that some people are escaping it. Thus increasing disparities in attainment of higher education among blacks is a fact to be celebrated, not deplored, if the alternative is less or no attainment.

However, a second distributive issue does raise serious normative and political problems. Even though most blacks are receiving more education than their parents did, blacks from less-advantaged families are in some ways falling behind blacks from advantaged families in educational attainment. Consider Table 1, which reports changes in the years of education over a twenty-five year period obtained by children of (roughly) professional, white-collar, lower white-collar, blue-collar, unskilled, and farming fathers respectively.³⁹ It reveals three facts important for our purposes.⁴⁰

³⁸. White men are following essentially the same pattern. That is, average years of higher education are increasing, the standard deviation in years of higher education is also increasing, and the standard deviation in total years of education is declining. These data are from OCG I and OCG II.

³⁹. Fathers' occupational status is measured in Duncan scores, that run ostensibly from 0 to 100 and actually from 0 to 96. Duncan scores are determined by ranking the educational requirements of the job and its income. Scores of 80-96 include most professionals and some businesspeople, especially bankers. Scores of 60-79 include corporate managers, low-level professionals, and some owners. Clerical and sales workers, some owners, and highly skilled blue collar workers earn scores of 40-59. Most blue-collar workers are ranked 20-39, and unskilled laborers and farmers are ranked 0-20. Duncan scores have

some odd anomalies. Dentists are the highest ranked occupation; more importantly, owners, managers, farmers and sales people are poorly classified because they are distinguished (if at all) by type of industry, not by the size of the operation they own or manage. Thus the president of IBM and the owner of a business supply store have similar Duncan scores. These scores also ignore the possibility that status rankings might differ between the races. Nevertheless, Duncan scores are the standard sociological measure of occupational success, and I shall use them here without modification.

40. These data should be taken with a large grain of salt, for several reasons. First, the discussion (but not the table) combines the two data sets (OCG and GSS) to keep the presentation manageable, but they are not completely comparable. Perhaps the worst problem is that OCG contains data only for male respondents, whereas GSS surveys both men and women. Second, there are too few blacks with fathers' Duncan scores above 60 to have much faith in the findings for white-collar blacks. However, we can perhaps take some comfort from the fact that the changes across categories and across years seem to fit a general pattern, even in the cells with very few people. There are no comparable problems with white sample sizes. Third, our analyses are still preliminary. Fourth, the results differ slightly depending on which dependent variable (education, income, or occupational status) we focus on, but we cannot yet report any clear patterns. Finally, children's reports of their parents' occupation may not be entirely trustworthy.

TABLE 1: Effect of Father's Occupational Status on Children's Education, in Years of Schooling (N's in parentheses)

	<u>1962</u>	<u>1973</u>	<u>1970s</u>	<u>1980s</u>
Father's Duncan score				
<u>60-96</u>				
whites	13.85 (1811)	14.34 (3271)	13.85 (1672)	14.22 (1396)
blacks	11.42 (17)	13.48 (79)	12.95 (41)	13.97 (55)
ratio, black/white	.82	.94	.94	.98
<u>40-59</u>				
whites	12.38 (2127)	12.99 (3169)	12.81 (1234)	13.30 (932)
blacks	10.69 (55)	12.28 (189)	12.23 (64)	13.41 (54)
ratio, black/white	.86	.95	.95	1.01
<u>20-39</u>				
whites	11.43 (2759)	12.27 (4307)	12.17 (1109)	12.43 (809)
blacks	9.32 (73)	11.08 (262)	11.82 (62)	13.16 (81)
ratio, black/white	.82	.90	.97	1.06
<u>0-19 (excluding farmers)</u>				
whites	10.29 (4262)	11.27 (6618)	11.14 (2317)	11.53 (1610)
blacks	9.36 (377)	10.49 (1473)	11.06 (352)	11.71 (326)
ratio, black/white	.91	.93	.99	1.02
<u>farmers</u>				
whites	9.41 (4893)	10.00 (5630)	10.33 (1745)	10.78 (1030)
blacks	5.90 (590)	7.86 (1431)	8.09 (353)	8.65 (230)
ratio, black/white	.63	.79	.78	.80

ratio, 0-19/60-96

whites	.74	.79	.80	.76
blacks	.82	.78	.85	.84

ratio, farmers/60-96

whites	.68	.70	.75	.76
blacks	.52	.58	.62	.62

absolute difference, (60-96)-(0-19)

whites	3.56	3.07	2.71	2.69
blacks	2.06	2.99	1.89	2.26

absolute difference, (60-96)-farmers

whites	4.44	4.34	3.52	3.44
blacks	5.52	5.62	4.86	5.32

Source: Analyses by Christopher Jencks of OCG I and II, and GSS I and II (see footnote 33 for a description of the data.)

First, by the 1980s, with the exception of farmers' children, blacks with fathers at all occupational levels had attained the same amount of schooling as similarly situated whites. The rows of ratios within each Duncan score category show that fact, since by the 1980s, the black/white ratio in each of the top four panels virtually equals 1.00. Even farmers' children are making noticeable gains, as the row of ratios in the "farmers" panel shows.⁴¹ Thus equal opportunity is working beautifully between the races within classes.

However, blacks with unskilled fathers are not improving their position relative to blacks with professional fathers. Consider the rows labeled "ratio, 0-19/60-96." The ratio of years of schooling for blacks with unskilled fathers (excluding farmers) compared to blacks with professional fathers did not change between 1963 and the 1980s. (The same result holds for whites.) However, farm children of both races are doing better than nonfarm children of unskilled fathers compared to well-off members of their own race, as the rows labeled

⁴¹. I report results for farmers' children separately because they are an unwieldy category but a very important one in terms of the number of blacks involved. Farmers are almost all categorized as "14" on the Duncan scale, regardless of the size and prosperity of the farm, or one's degree of control over it. An additional problem is the fact that the social and economic significance of being a farmer's or farm laborer's child was very different in the 1960s than it is now, and very different for blacks than for whites.

"ratio, farmers/ 60-96" show. Thus equal opportunity is not working as well across classes within the races.

Third and finally, if we look at absolute rather than relative changes -- that is, at changes in the actual amount of schooling received -- the story becomes even less happy. Consider the rows of Table 1 labeled "absolute differences, (60-96)-(0-19). Black professionals' children, who start with more years of education, also gain more years of schooling over the twenty-five years than black unskilled laborers' children do, whereas the reverse is the case for whites. More precisely, blacks with fathers' Duncan scores of 60 to 96 gained 2.55 more years of schooling between 1962 and the 1980s, whereas blacks with fathers' Duncan scores of 0 to 19 gained only 2.35 more years of schooling. Conversely, well-off whites gained only .37 more years of schooling, compared to a gain of 1.24 years for badly-off whites. (As the final pair of rows shows, farmers' children did better by this measure than other children with low-scoring fathers, with black farm children gaining 2.75 years and white farm children gaining 1.37 years.)

Put more simply, the gap between the highest and lowest status blacks increased by .20 years of schooling over this period, whereas it dropped by .87 years of schooling for whites. Two-tenths of a year of schooling may not be much. But at a minimum the trajectory is in the wrong direction, and at a maximum, if the quality of education is higher on average for high-status than for low-status children, this simple quantitative measure is only the tip of the iceberg.⁴²

Abstracting from this mind-numbing march of numbers, we can conclude two things about equal educational opportunity. On the one hand, it is operating as we would wish it to between the races -- blacks are becoming more equal to whites in their ability to transfer their advantages to their children. On the other hand, equal educational opportunity is not operating as we would wish it to within the black race -- poor blacks are in absolute terms losing ground compared to better-off blacks in their ability to transfer their advantages to their children. It is too simple and it distorts the facts to say that class is

⁴². For evidence that the same pattern of results holds for income, see Wayne Villemez and Candace Wiswell, "The Impact of Diminishing Discrimination on the Internal Size Distribution of Black Income: 1954-74," Social Forces 56, No. 4 (June 1978):1019-1034. They report that "in the industrial non-South, decreasing black-white inequality has been accompanied by increasing inequality among blacks, and there are indications that most black economic gains have occurred at the top of the black distribution."

Using OCG I and II, Michael Hout reaches the same conclusion with respect to jobs; "the men most likely to move up from any 1962 status [to a higher status job in 1973] were those men from the highest status backgrounds. In other words, the opportunities that opened up were not evenly distributed, but disproportionately went to the men from relatively advantaged backgrounds." "Occupational Mobility of Black Men, 1962-1973" American Sociological Review 49 (1984), pp. 314-316.

becoming more important than race.⁴³ What is the case is that the interaction between racial inequalities and economic inequalities is such that the very changes we applaud when viewed from one angle are to be deplored when viewed from another.

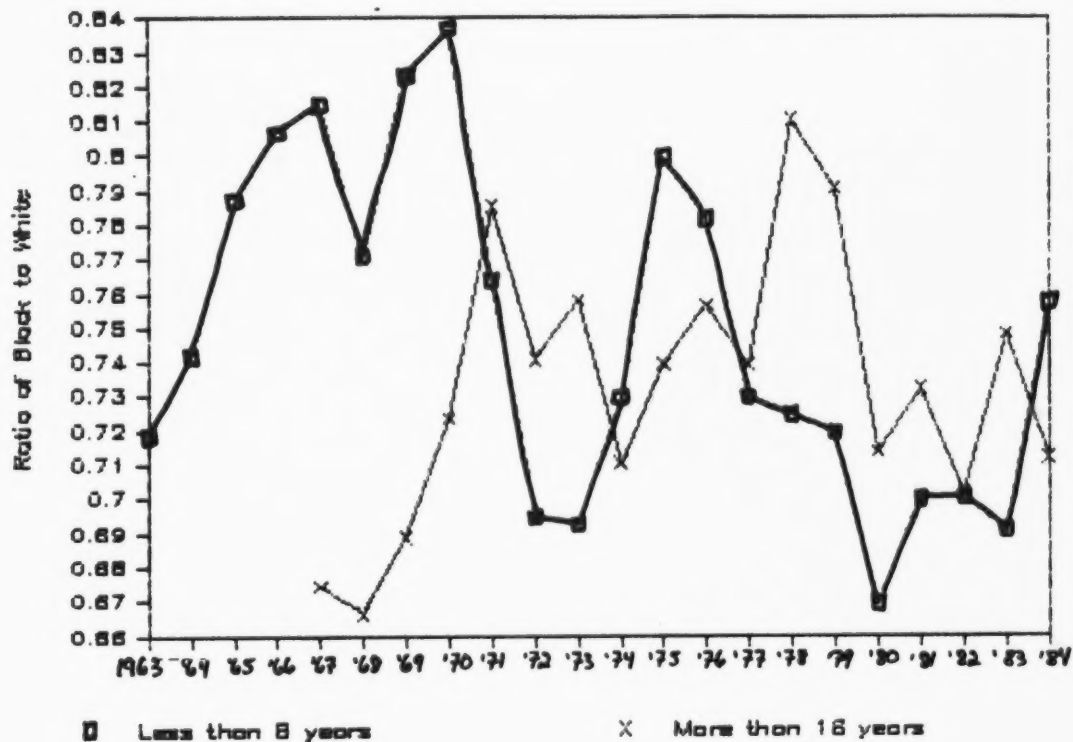
A third distributive issue also reveals the double-edged quality of equal educational opportunity. This is the issue of returns to education -- how well more schooling translates into higher incomes in adult life. These data differ from those in Table 1 in two important ways: education is now the (presumed) cause of income differences rather than the result; and we are looking at cross-sectional differences over time rather than intergenerational transfers. Nevertheless, they tell essentially the same story. Blacks are holding their own in comparison with whites within socioeconomic strata, but socioeconomic differences within both races, and especially within the black race, are increasing.

Consider Figures 1 through 4. Figure 1 shows ratios of median incomes for adult men by race and educational level over the past twenty years.⁴⁴

⁴³. I am referring here, of course, to the rather simplistic responses to William J. Wilson, The Declining Significance of Race (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) such as Thomas Morgan, "The World Ahead: Black Parents Prepare Their Children for Pride and Prejudice," New York Times Magazine, October 27, 1985, pp. 32ff. The reverse claim -- that class doesn't matter within the black community -- is often more simplistic and less excusable. See, unfortunately, Alphonso Pinkney, The Myth of Black Progress (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) and much of Charles Willie, ed. The Caste and Class Controversy (Bayside, NY: General Hall, Inc., 1979).

⁴⁴. The sources for Figures 1-4 are U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, P-60 Series, titled (with some variations across years) "Money Income of Families and Persons in the United States: 19XX." For reasons known only to the Census Bureau, "adult" men are defined as 14 years and older in 1963, 18 years and older in 1975-1979, and 25 years and older in all other years. For 1963-1966, the categories are "white" and "nonwhite;" for succeeding years, the categories are "white" and "black." Data are not available on returns to sixteen or more years of schooling for either race until 1967.

FIGURE 1: Ratios of Black to White Income for Adult Men,
by Educational Level, 1963 -- 1984



The dark line shows the ratio of median incomes for black and white men with less than eight years of education. It indicates great variation over the two decades, perhaps a slight increase in inequality, but overall not much stable change. The light line shows the ratio of median incomes for black and white men with sixteen or more years of education. It too shows great variation but overall not much stable change.

Figure 2 shows the absolute difference in incomes between blacks and whites with similar levels of education. The story is essentially the same: considerable fluctuation over the years, especially for college-educated men,

perhaps a slight decline in inequality for college-educated men and a slight increase in inequality for grade-school-educated men, but no dramatic changes in differences in returns to education for either the best-educated or the worst-educated categories. In short, inequality in returns to education between the races within socioeconomic strata has changed very little since the early 1960s.

FIGURE 2: Absolute Differences in Income between Black and White Adult Men, by Educational Level, in 1982 Dollars, 1963 - 1984

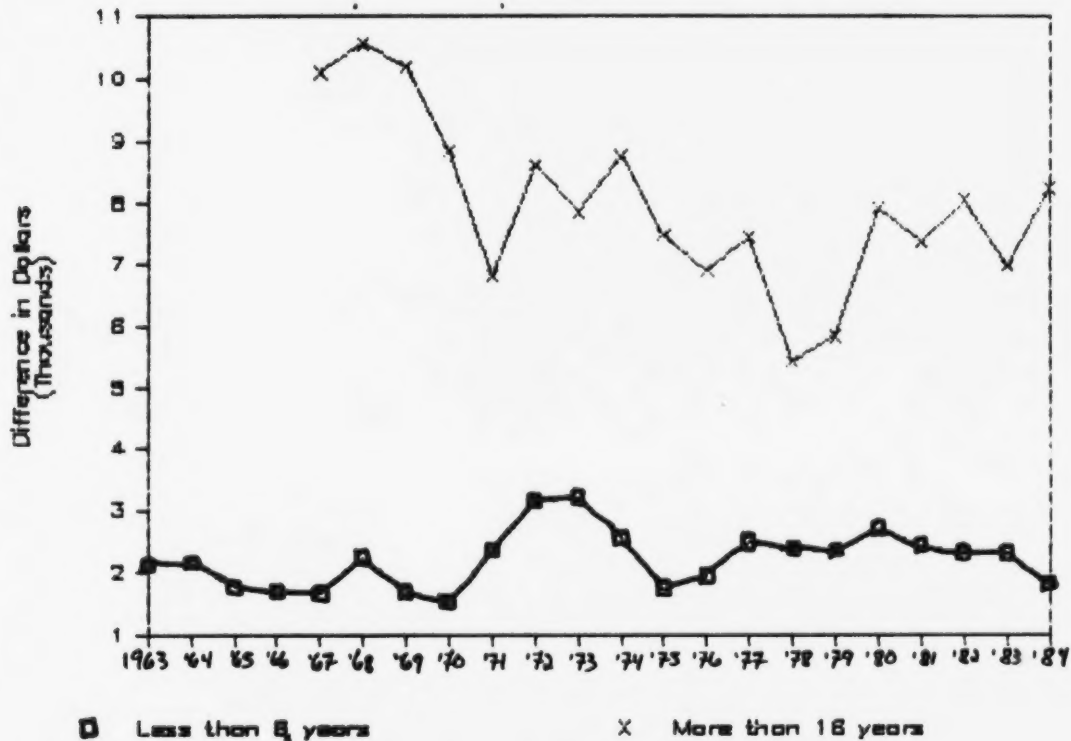
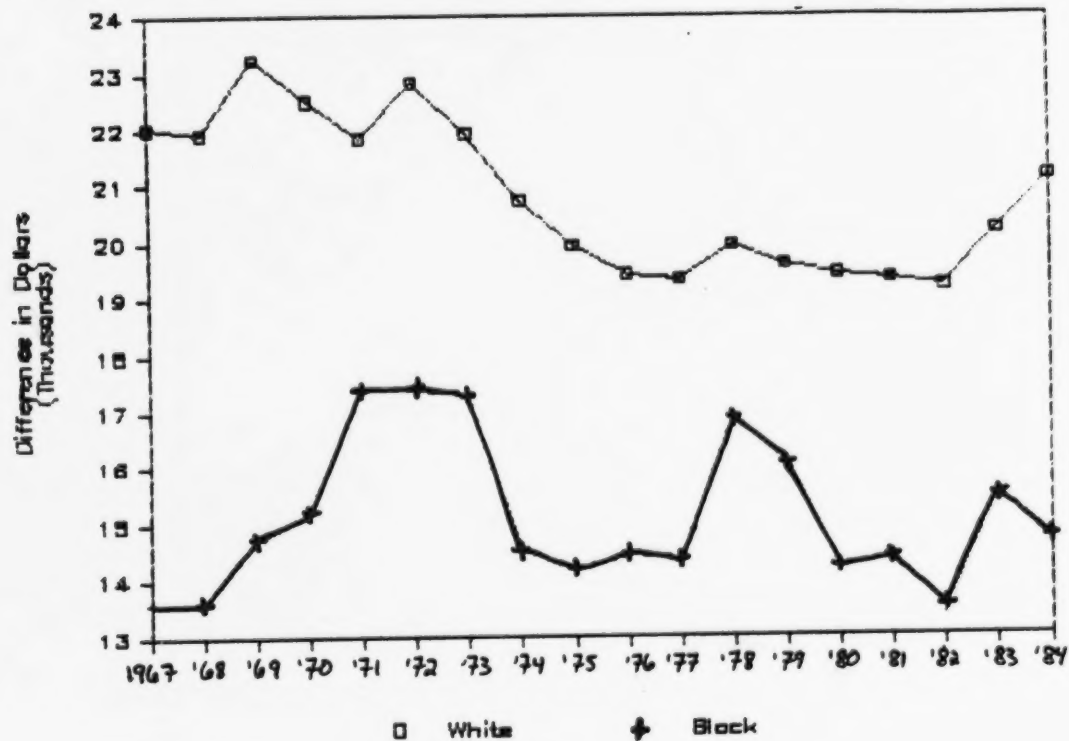


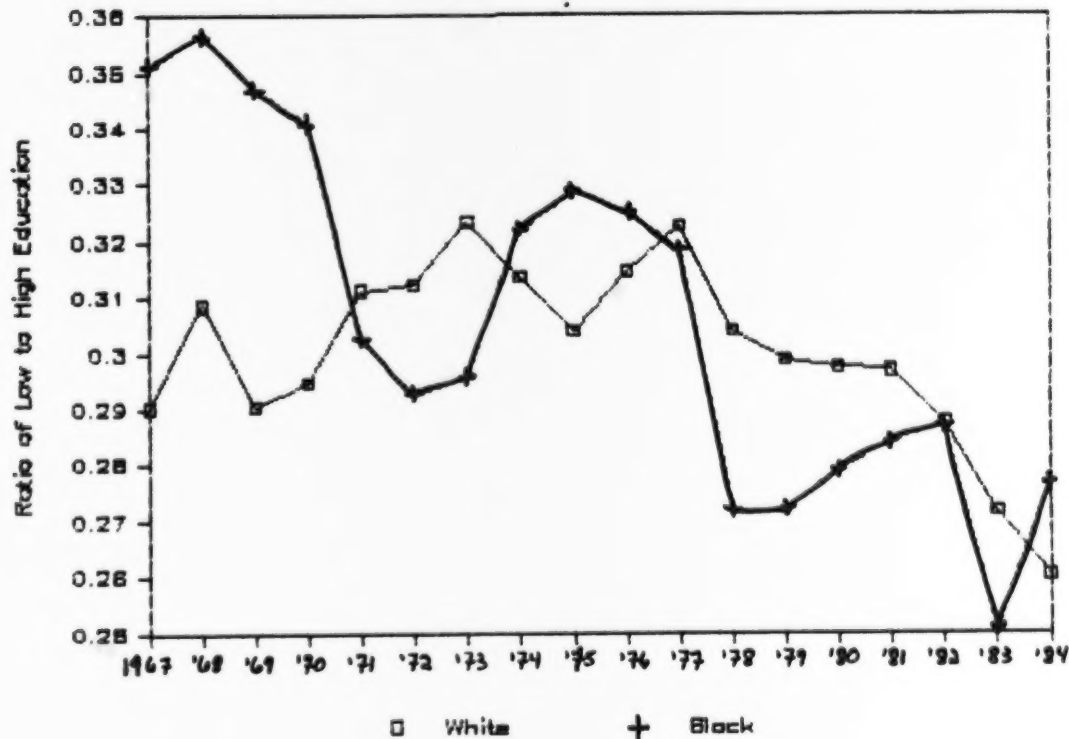
Figure 3 resembles Figure 2 in that it too shows absolute differences in returns to schooling, but the categories for comparison have changed. Instead of looking across races within each educational category, we are now looking across educational categories within each race. That is, the dark line now shows the difference in income between blacks with less than eight years of education and blacks with sixteen or more years of education; the light line shows income differences between well- and poorly-educated whites. Again we see considerable variation across the years. We also see a slight decline in inequality among whites but not among blacks.

FIGURE 3: Absolute Differences in Income between Well- and Poorly Educated Adult Men, by Race, in 1982 Dollars, 1967 - 1984



Finally, Figure 4 shows the only strong trend in changes in returns to education. It reveals growing inequality between socioeconomic strata within races, especially within the black race. It shows ratios of the income of adult men with less than eight years of education to adult men with sixteen or more years of education. The dark line shows these ratios for blacks, and the light line, for whites. Again we see considerable variation over the years, but we also see clear changes. Poorly-educated white men are doing worse compared to well-educated white men, and poorly-educated black men are doing much worse compared to well-educated black men.

FIGURE 4: Ratios of Incomes of Well- to Poorly-Educated Adult Men, by Race, 1967 - 1984



One could read the results of Figures 1 through 4 as evidence that equal educational opportunity is working -- that well-educated black men are now able to reap the rewards of their schooling in a way that they were prevented from doing until the civil rights revolution of the 1960s. That reading is not wrong, but it is partial. These data also show that as well-off blacks are improving their position, badly-off blacks are not, and are losing ground relatively if not absolutely. (The same is true, to a slightly lesser degree, for whites.) Equal educational opportunity looks fine from the top of the heap, but in the view from the bottom its promises must ring rather hollow.

This contrast between success for some and relative if not absolute worsening for others would be even starker if the coincidence were causal, if the badly-off are doing worse because the well-off are doing better. I know of no direct evidence on this point. However, two strong lines of argument suggest this causal relationship.

First, analysts and poverty workers worry that the decline of occupational, school, and residential segregation, and the growth of middle-

income black suburbs,⁴⁵ have led the most successful (and by presumption the most law-abiding, well-educated, work-oriented) blacks to leave the cities. Even if they do not move away, better-off blacks are increasingly sending their children to private schools⁴⁶ or to magnet schools for the gifted and talented, which are designed to retain middle class children.⁴⁷ Adults left in ghettos are disproportionately unemployed or underemployed, involved in crime and drug use, very young unmarried mothers, and otherwise not exemplars of middle-class habits, skills, and outlooks. Similarly, almost the only children left in ghetto schools are those too poor or too unsuccessful academically to leave. In short, desirable role models (not to speak of employers and disciplinarians) are no longer available to poor black youth.⁴⁸ The passing of segregation has

⁴⁵. See William O'Hare et al., Blacks on the Move (Washington D.C.: Joint Center for Political Studies, 1982), esp. table 5.7 and chapter 6.

⁴⁶. In 1965, 96% of both elementary and high school private students were white; by 1984, only 90% of private elementary and 92% of private high school students were white. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States:1986 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985), p. 130. The rate of growth for black public school students is greater in the suburbs than in central cities. See Martin Katzman and Harold Childs, "Black Flight: The Middle Class Black Reaction to School Integration and Metropolitan Change" (Dallas: University of Texas at Dallas, Southwest Center for Economic and Community Development, 1979) and Martin Katzman, "The Flight of Blacks from Central-City Public Schools," Urban Education 18, No. 3 (October 1983): 259-283.

⁴⁷. For example, in Richmond California, the desegregation plan called for middle and "upper-middle-class children [of both races]... to be integrated into... the only ghetto school that had a brand new plant, that was being developed as a demonstration school with a specially selected staff, and that already had several federally funded special projects offering academic enrichment and innovation." Lillian Rubin, Busing and Backlash (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 45-49. See also Robert Crain et al., Making Desegregation Work (Cambridge: Ballinger, 1982), pp. 144-147 for a discussion of how the implementation of a desegregation plan may benefit middle-class children of both races but harm poor black children.

⁴⁸. William J. Wilson is probably the main proponent of this view, which shapes his current multi-million dollar study of the urban underclass. His argument does not yet appear in print, but he has presented it at several conferences. See, for example, the transcript of conference on "Defining the Underclass," Joint Center for Political Studies, Washington D.C., March 5, 1987; and Colleen Cordes, "Chicago Sociologist Challenges 'Culture of Poverty' as Explanation for Plight of Inner-City Poor," Chronicle of Higher Education, March 11, 1987, pp. 7,13.

Even Charles Murray's thesis in Losing Ground (New York: Basic Books, 1984) can be read as grounds for claiming a causal connection between success for some blacks and failure for others. Evidence is accumulating that the War on Poverty worked for blacks who, absent a history of severe segregation,

not only helped some more than others, it has also hurt some because it has helped others.

Indirect evidence suggests that at least one possible counterargument to this contention is mistaken. In this view, the exodus of middle-class blacks to the suburbs does not necessarily produce a drain of middle-class blacks from the cities. That is, since the absolute number of middle-class blacks is rising, it is theoretically possible for many more blacks to move out than used to, but just as many to remain in urban black neighborhoods as there used to be. However, this more hopeful scenario is apparently mistaken; poor blacks are becoming more concentrated in ghettos with other poor blacks. In the fifty largest cities in the United States, the proportion of poor blacks living in extreme poverty areas (census tracts of about 4,000 people with 40% or more residents below the poverty line) has increased by 58.6% from 1970 to 1980, whereas the proportion of poor whites in extreme poverty areas has increased by only 2.2%.⁴⁹

would have been successful middle-class citizens. That is, stable families with two parents, some of the elderly, and fairly well-educated young people have escaped poverty largely through judicious use of the welfare system. (See, in general, Sheldon Danziger and Daniel Weinberg, eds. Fighting Poverty (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). However, if Murray is right, that same welfare system mired young black women and their children (among others) deeper in poverty. Thus the causal connection between black successes and failures is not a direct one, but goes through the welfare system; a policy that aided some harmed others.

Various other explanations of the worsening of inner city black poverty do not necessarily contradict Wilson's, but they place less emphasis on the causal relation between success for some blacks and failure for others. John Kasarda, for example, argues that the basic problem is a mismatch between available jobs and the education and training of inner-city youth. See Kasarda, "Urban Change and Minority Opportunities," in Paul Peterson, ed. The New Urban Reality (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1985): 33-68. Others continue to focus on the persisting role of racial discrimination, especially in periods of high unemployment; see Richard McGahey and John Jeffries, Minorities and the Labor Market (Washington D.C.: Joint Center for Political Studies, 1985).

49. Richard Nathan and John Lago, Memorandum on "The Changing Size and Concentration of the Poverty Population of Large Cities, 1970-1980" (Princeton: Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson School, December 17, 1986). Data are from U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Census of Population, 1980: Subject Reports: Poverty Areas in Large Cities, (PC 80-2-8D), table 1; and U.S. Census of Population, 1970: Subject Reports: Low-Income Areas in Large Cities (PC(2)-9B), tables 1 and 6.

See also Reynolds Farley, "Residential Segregation in Urbanized Areas of the United States in 1970," Demography 14, No. 4 (November 1977): 496-518; and Albert Simkus, "Residential Segregation by Occupation and Race in Ten Urbanized Areas, 1950-1970," American Sociological Review 43 (February 1978): 81-93 for evidence of increasing polarization of housing by class within the black race.

My thanks to Michael White of Princeton University for starting my

A second argument about the causal connection between the gains of well-off blacks and the losses of poor blacks is more structural and institutional. In this view, the very efforts urban leaders make to reverse decline and bring the middle class back to the city are part of the problem. Both black and white mayors increasingly focus on progrowth strategies to maintain and build the "corporate city" of information- and service-providing skyscrapers. Some local political regimes see no alternative to decay; others eagerly embrace "growth" as the answer to all their city's problems. In either case, the effect is to help middle class professionals of both races, many of whom live in the suburbs, and to take land, homes, and perhaps jobs away from the poor without providing compensating higher taxes, better schools, or opportunities for advancement. Some exponents of this view insist that cities have alternatives, whereas others are more fatalistic. For my purposes that point is less important than the observation that providing opportunities for some (usually well-off) blacks comes at the expense of opportunities for other (usually badly-off) blacks.⁵⁰

Whether or not gains for some blacks are causing losses for others, it is at least the case that some blacks are losing ground relatively if not absolutely as other blacks are gaining. Thus the first variety of double-edgedness in equal opportunity -- the phenomenon of the lace-curtain Irish -- is clearly occurring among contemporary blacks. This dynamic provides the framework for the operation of the other four types of double-edgedness. That is, the changing relationship between race and class simultaneously sets into motion the dynamics recognized or illustrated at different points in American history by Abraham Lincoln, the social Darwinists, Herbert Croly, and contemporary Yuppies.

thinking along these lines.

⁵⁰. Adolph Reed, "The Black Urban Regime: Structural Origins and Constraints" (New Haven: Yale University, Department of Political Science, 1987) is one of the best expositions of this view.

Croly's Problem: The Belief in Equal Opportunity Can Backfire

Two of the other problems identified in my introductory tour through American history reappear as a consequence of the growing economic differentiation among blacks. The first is Herbert Croly's fear that few things endanger the American polity more than a loss of faith in the opportunity to get ahead. The issue here is the black underclass.

The "underclass" is the new buzzword among social scientists and journalists concerned with racial issues in the United States.⁵¹ We have no clear definition of its composition or explanation of its causes; we cannot even agree on whether it is a pejorative or merely descriptive term. Nevertheless, a consensus is building that some poor blacks⁵² are importantly different from others, in ways that threaten not only themselves but also the larger black and white communities.

Here I will adopt a variant of Richard Nathan's stringent definition of the black underclass, in order sharply to distinguish the black underclass from the "merely" poor.⁵³ Members of the black underclass are adolescents and young adults who are geographically isolated among other poor urban blacks, economically isolated in that they are disconnected from the mainstream labor market, psychologically isolated in that they hold values sharply at variance with mainstream American values, and behaviorally "deviant" in that they are much more prone to engage in violence and illegal acts than most Americans. I do not wish to dispute here the many large empirical and normative questions raised by this definition;⁵⁴ I wish only to point out the frightening

51. It was popularized, if not invented, by Ken Auletta in The Underclass (New York: Random House, 1983). See also Douglas Glasgow, The Black Underclass (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1980); and William J. Wilson, "The Urban Underclass in Advanced Industrial Society," in Peterson, ed., The New Urban Reality, pp. 129-160.

52. And in most views, some poor Anglos and Hispanics. This paper focuses only on blacks, but my analytic claim about equal opportunity should hold equally well in the slightly different empirical circumstances of the non-black underclass.

53. See Richard Nathan, "The Underclass -- Will It Always Be With Us?" (Princeton: Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson School, unpublished paper, 1986)

54. Among other things, this definition says nothing about whether the black underclass is qualitatively distinct from an Anglo, Hispanic, or Asian underclass; whether it is a new phenomenon or merely newly (re)discovered; whether it is growing; whether it is caused by racism, poverty, personality flaws, or some combination; and what is to be done about it. For discussions of various definitions of the underclass, see the very interesting effort by Erol Ricketts and Isabel Sawhill in "Defining and Measuring the Underclass" (Washington D.C.: Urban Institute, unpublished paper, 1986), Wilson, "The Urban Underclass"; Katherine McFate, "Views of the Underclass: Implications for Policy-makers" (Washington D.C.: Joint Center for Political Studies,

consequences for themselves as well as others of a group of young people who have given up all hope of climbing the ladder of equal opportunity.

Quantitative evidence tells part of this story. Focusing only on education, 13.2% of blacks aged 16 to 24 dropped out of school in 1984, compared with 10.8% of whites. The dropout rate for blacks has declined dramatically in the past 15 years,⁵⁵ but dropout rates in some inner cities approach 50%.⁵⁶ Eighteen percent of blacks in the lowest socioeconomic quartile (compared with 24% of poor whites) dropped out of school.⁵⁷ Black women are much more likely to report pregnancy as a reason for leaving school than white women (who are much more likely to report marriage); black male dropouts are more likely than similar whites to give financial reasons or say they were expelled.⁵⁸ The average difference in reading scores between nine-year-old blacks and whites in "disadvantaged urban" schools has increased sharply in the past four years, after declining steadily for a decade. The differences are once again as great as they had been in 1970, a finding that holds for no other group of students at any age.⁵⁹ Illiteracy continues to be

unpublished paper, 1987); and the extremely helpful paper by Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel, and Dorothy Watson, "Family Structure, Poverty and the Underclass" (Madison: University of Wisconsin, Center for Ecology and Demography, Working Paper 86-13, 1986), pp. 11-17.

55. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract, 1986 p. 148. In 1970, 22.2% of young blacks and 10.8% of young whites dropped out of high school.

56. A survey of 1980 high school sophomores reports higher overall dropout rates -- 12.2% of nonHispanic whites and 16.8% of blacks -- than the Census Bureau. This survey shows higher dropout rates among black urban residents than among nonurban blacks or all whites. 20.3% of urban blacks, compared to 15.5% of urban whites had dropped out of school by the fall of 1982. Richard Whalen, "The Transition from High School," in National Center for Education Statistics, The Condition of Education, 1985 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, n.d.), p. 208.

57. Ibid., p. 210.

58. Data on dropouts and their reasons are from Children's Defense Fund, Black and White Children in America, tables 8.8 and 8.9. For data on dropouts in earlier years see U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1986 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985), table 248.

59. Reading score differences are also rising between black and white nine-year-old rural students, but they remain well below differences at the start of testing, in 1970. For all other age groups, and for all "advantaged urban" students, racial differences in reading test scores continue to decline. "Advantaged urban" blacks continue to do much better in absolute terms than "disadvantaged urban" and "rural" blacks, and their nine-year-old scores have not declined recently compared to comparable whites. That point is further evidence of the increasing educational split between well-off and badly-off

higher among blacks than among whites. 14% of young black adults, compared to 6% of Hispanics and 2% of whites cannot read well enough to locate a piece of information in a newspaper article; 18% of blacks, compared to 8% of Hispanics and 2% of whites cannot write well enough to enter personal background information on a job application; 25% of blacks, compared to 13% of Hispanics and 4% of whites cannot add two numbers over 50.⁶⁰

Words, for once, bear out the numbers. Young black men report that crime pays better than any job they are able to get,⁶¹ so they see no reason to stay in school. Young black women have babies in order to keep their boyfriends and have someone to love, so they too leave school.⁶² Majorities of poor black survey respondents agree that black inequality is a consequence of discrimination and of a poor educational system and of lack of motivation among poor blacks. Even if different majorities agree with each possible explanation, some poor blacks are agreeing with two or even all three. That group must perceive insuperable barriers to mobility, since in their view poverty results from both internal and external causes.⁶³

What all of this adds up to is an environment, set of resources, and repertoire of behaviors that deny some poor blacks any realistic chance to "pursue happiness" as most Americans define it, and they know it. One possible result is more riots like those in 1980 in Liberty City, Miami. For the first time in the long history of American race riots, poor blacks exploded with focused hatred of whites. As one observer put it, "We're not dealing with the '60s. These rioters were different. [In previous riots] white people got hurt because they got in the way or because they provoked a confrontation. In this

blacks. See Lyle Jones, "Trends in School Achievement of Black Children" (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1987).

⁶⁰. Irwin Kirsch and Ann Jungeblut, Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults (Princeton: Educational Testing Service, National Assessment for Educational Progress, n.d (c. 1986)), pp. 10-11, 21-23, 31.

⁶¹. Richard Freeman and Harry Holzer, eds., The Black Youth Unemployment Crisis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁶². See Leon Dash, "At Risk: Chronicles of Teen-Age Pregnancy," Washington Post, 6-part series, January 26-31, 1986. A more systematic discussion of teen pregnancy, which does not, however, address the question from the new mother's perspective, is Kristin Moore and Martha Burt, Private Crisis, Public Cost (Washington D.C.: Urban Institute, 1982)

⁶³. I.A. Lewis and William Schneider, "Black Voting, Bloc Voting, and the Democrats," Public Opinion 6, No. 5 (October/November 1983), p. 13. Specifically, 65% of poor blacks agreed that black inequality resulted from discrimination; 64% saw it resulting from the poor educational system; and 56% explained it as a lack of will power or motivation among poor blacks. Only one explanation offered to respondents for black poverty received relatively little support from poor blacks; only (1) 39% agreed that "most blacks have less in-born ability to learn" than whites.

riot, the purpose was to kill white people. That's a whole new ballgame to deal with." Black youths fought over an ax with which to beat a white passerby; one white victim had his ears and tongue cut off; rioters prevented an ambulance from reaching three dying white teenagers. We suddenly saw the power of young blacks with no stake in society, no hope of one, and nothing to lose: "The white man ain't been doing us no good. So we didn't do him no good. The white man got the jobs and we don't got no jobs. The white man got everything and we got nothing. It ain't right."⁶⁴

The moral of this story for American politics is obvious; the moral for an analysis of equal opportunity is slightly more subtle. If Americans did not believe so strongly in the existence and efficacy of equality of educational opportunity, the ideology would not work as well as it does. But it is the very strength of our belief that makes a loss of faith so devastating for the faithless, and makes the faithless so frightening and seemingly foreign to the rest of us.⁶⁵ As Herbert Croly said seven decades ago, "the serious nature of contemporary American political and economic symptoms at least pointedly suggests the existence of some radical disease."⁶⁶

The Yuppies' Problem: Success Breeds Worry about More Success

The third variety of double-edged equal opportunity focuses on a different segment of the newly disparate black community. This is the problem I described in the first section as the Yuppie issue -- the insecurity of well-off young people comparing themselves to their own past. The problem for well-off blacks, however, is slightly different from that of well-off whites. At least as journalists see it, the latter are anxious because they have not progressed

⁶⁴. George Lardner Jr. and Margot Hornblower, "Miami: Brutality Was Not Expected," Washington Post, May 25, 1980, pp. A1, A16.

⁶⁵. This phenomenon of disillusion and outrage may not be limited to blacks. At least one commentator argues that the recent unprovoked attacks on three blacks in Howard Beach, New York, grew out of the feeling that "we have nothing to hope for, or hold onto except our turf, and we will guard it against all comers" (my paraphrase). To quote directly, "the territorial instinct...is especially tenacious in those of us who must make a virtue of our rootedness -- who can't afford to move out, away, on, or up." Jack Beatty, "Howard Beach Portents," New York Times, January 7, 1987, p. A23.

Note how this phenomenon of hopelessness differs in kind as well as degree from the anger of residents of Canarsie, for example. The latter still believe in equal opportunity and are seeking (against unfair odds, in their view) to make it work. (See Jonathan Rieder, Canarsie (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.) The underclass and Howard Beach attackers apparently no longer believe that opportunity beckons, at least not to them.

⁶⁶. Croly, The Promise of American Life, p. 25.

as far as their parents did, and fear that they will never do so. The former, in contrast, are anxious because they have progressed so much farther than their parents did, and fear what they might lose.

Some see barriers from persistent, if increasingly subtle, racism. In a recent movie, an elegant black woman in a glittering cocktail dress describes herself as "the obligatory second," invited to a high-toned Washington party so the hosts could not be accused of tokenism. Real-life blacks express the same fear, albeit with less wit; black suburbanites fear that even in good public schools, "black youngsters are not getting the kind of encouragement and enhancement they feel they need in order to make it, and there's dual treatment for black youngsters and for white youngsters."⁶⁷

Some well-off blacks (perhaps the same people) fear too much integration with the still-dominant race. Their motives range from personal insecurity to anger over apparent white indifference to black problems to a worry that their distinctive cultural identity and heritage will be swamped. Again, the evidence here hardly warrants the name, since it consists mostly of journalistic anecdotes. Parents worry that in integrated schools their children will forget their roots and history,⁶⁸ or conversely, will fail because they are "too busy being only one thing -- black."⁶⁹ Most worrisome of all are "rumors of inferiority" within the black race that surface most destructively in situations where blacks must compete with high-powered whites. In this view, black underachievement is due partly to a tendency of capable blacks "to avoid intellectual engagement and competition. Avoidance is rooted in the fears and self-doubt engendered by a major legacy of American racism: the strong negative stereotypes about black intellectual capabilities."⁷⁰

A third anxiety associated with black middle-class success focusses less on education itself than on its costs and returns. It is the phenomenon of being "one paycheck away from poverty." A black couple whose two professions and real estate investments produce an annual income over \$70,000 worry that "send one kid to school, and you might as well be on welfare...A guy could have a good job and after an affirmative action cut, could have nothing." This

67. One suburban former public school parent made the same point more sharply; her son's teacher "was attempting to program him for failure. My child did not fit the stereotype of a black male, and [the teacher] decided he couldn't be as bright as his record indicated." Zita Arocha, "Disappointment for Suburbanites," Washington Post, November 23, 1986, pp. A1 ff.

68. Patrice Gaines-Carter, "Remembering Times Before Black Was Beautiful," Washington Post, February 19, 1984, pp. C1 ff; Patrice Gaines-Carter, "Is My 'Post-Integration' Daughter Black Enough?" Washington Post, February 24, 1985, pp. C1 ff.

69. Leah Latimer, "Will Integration Hurt My Black Son's Education?" Washington Post, April 20, 1986, pp. C4 ff.

70. Jeff Howard and Ray Hammond, "Rumors of Inferiority," The New Republic, September 9, 1985, pp. 17-21.

couple sees the term "middle class" as divisive and misleading: "we need to eradicate the boxes people tend to put us in. We're all in the same boat. There's really no difference."⁷¹ The fact that this claim is published by the official organ of the NAACP is no less astonishing than the view itself. These people are not unique; 34% of middle-class black respondents in the Los Angeles Times survey "feel economically vulnerable" and 38% claim that they "belong to the 'have-nots'".⁷²

Finally, success for blacks may come at the cost of guilt about leaving less-successful fellows mired in the ghetto. Middle-class blacks agonize over whether they and their peers are doing enough for poor blacks, and how much they can do without jeopardizing their own insecure financial and emotional situation. They accuse each other as well as whites of abandoning the ghettos, and fail surprisingly often to point out that there is no inherent reason why the black impulse to attain the security of the suburbs is any different from the traditionally praised white impulse to do the same.⁷³

How realistic are these fears and sensitivities? One answer, of course, is that they are completely real for the people who feel them, a fact sufficient to cause us concern about equal opportunity's most visible successes. In addition, these fears may be well-founded. The number of black high school graduates going to college rose dramatically in the early 1970s, but has been declining since then.⁷⁴ Many traditionally black colleges have always lacked a firm financial footing, but their viability and ability to attract good

⁷¹. Norman Riley, "Attitudes of the New Black Middle-Class," The Crisis 93, No. 10 (December 1986), pp. 17-18.

⁷². These figures compare with 24% of white middle-class respondents feeling economically vulnerable and 19% identifying with the "have-nots". In addition, many more working-class blacks than working-class whites are materially insecure. 51% of black working-class respondents and only 36% of comparable whites feel economically vulnerable; the figures on identifying with the "have-nots" are 54% and 34% respectively. Lewis and Schneider, "Black Voting," p. 13.

⁷³. It may be useful at this point to restate my argument about the relationship between race and equality of opportunity. I am not arguing (as one reader of an earlier draft suggested) that the problems of alienation among the poor and insecurity among the rich are unique to blacks. In fact, just the reverse; blacks are recreating, albeit with variations specific to their circumstances, the successes and failures experienced by whites over the past two centuries. My only point is that all of this change is happening in one generation for blacks, whereas it was spread over many generations for whites.

⁷⁴. Reynolds Farley, Memorandum on "Trends in College Enrollment at Ages 18-24" (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Population Studies Center, April 1, 1987).

students are perhaps more endangered now than they have ever been.⁷⁵ Financial returns to higher education still lag for blacks in comparison to whites.⁷⁶ Racism may be on the rise in traditionally white universities.⁷⁷

Even though lots of data apparently provide empirical support for middle-class black fears of white racism, we must be cautious in drawing that inference. Consider only one piece of this complex mosaic. Blacks in desegregated schools are much more likely to be suspended and expelled than whites, are much more likely to be placed in compensatory classes or classes for the educable mentally retarded, and are much less likely to be in advanced reading groups or college preparatory tracks. But these data are not easily interpreted. Disproportionate suspensions, for example, may indicate administrators' and teachers' prejudice, or they may indicate that black children are more violent than white children. Even if the latter is the case, perhaps that violence is a response to black children's frustration over subtly pervasive racism. We run into the same tangle with compensatory and advanced education. Perhaps black children need more help and are less likely to be outstanding students rather than simply being shoved into lower tracks -- but perhaps that failure to achieve is itself a consequence of discrimination. Without much more careful study, a paper that is already too long can conclude only that middle-class blacks are probably oversensitive but whites are almost certainly too complacent about the persistence of racism after the firehoses have disappeared.

I have few firm conclusions, then, about the "validity" of black middle-class anxieties; their very existence may be the politically relevant fact. Equal educational opportunity has surely led to astonishing success for some blacks, but its very rapidity and extent have produced costs as well as benefits. Once again, equal opportunity is a double-edged sword.

Lincoln's Problem: Helping One Group Hurts Another

A fourth way in which a virtue of equal opportunity creates its own defects moves away from relations among blacks to relations between the races. This problem is the contemporary manifestation of Lincoln's concern that

⁷⁵. The best recent overview of the problems of traditionally black colleges, and the reasons that blacks hold them so dear, is Antoine Garibaldi, ed. Black Colleges and Universities (New York: Praeger, 1984).

⁷⁶. For evidence on this point presented rather differently from that in table 2, see Farley, Blacks and Whites, pp. 83-90; and Smith and Welch, Closing the Gap.

⁷⁷. It is an indication of something (perhaps only how mutually dependent the media are) that Time magazine and Newsweek featured stories on "Blacks Protest[ing] Campus Racism" in their issues of the same week, April 6, 1987. A survey by William Allen of the University of Michigan provides a broader base from which to claim a rise in racial incidents. See ??

freeing black slaves would harm the chances of white workers. Many low-status whites fear that increasing the opportunities for success of poor blacks will lessen their own chances to succeed.

Explicating this point requires understanding the relationship between progress and equal opportunity. Logically, equal opportunity can exist in a static or even declining economy, so long as everyone has an equal chance (somehow defined -- but that is another paper) to attain the unchanged or diminishing number of coveted positions. But psychologically and politically, equal opportunity works only so long as people believe in it -- that is, believe that they (or their children) are reasonably likely to achieve their goals.⁷⁸ Furthermore, as the discussion of Yuppies suggests, it probably only works so long as people believe that they (or their children) have a better chance to achieve their goals than their parents did, or alternatively that they have a good chance to achieve higher goals than their parents did. In short, Americans believe in equal opportunity because they really believe in progress. (This paper may be unintentional testimony to this claim; up to this point, I have generally concluded that equal opportunity is working only when some segment of the population demonstrates upward mobility without some other segment being equally downwardly mobile.)⁷⁹

Americans have generally been able to conflate their belief in equal opportunity with progress because the two have proceeded roughly hand in hand. With a few important and obvious exceptions, the United States has simultaneously expanded the categories of people covered and the fairness of opportunities to advance, and increased the average level of education and the rate of general economic growth. Only in periods of contraction (e.g. the 1930s), or depressed regions of the country (e.g. the Midwest in the 1890s) have we seen socialist or populist movements that denounced equal opportunity as a sham.

I cannot here discuss the history of the intertwining of equal opportunity and progress, but I can point out its implications for contemporary race relations. If whites feel that equalizing opportunities for blacks will harm their own chances to progress, they will resist the former in the interests of the latter. The clearest example of this phenomenon is white working class opposition to affirmative action policies. Qualitative evidence on this point appears in virtually all good ethnographic research on racial attitudes. A white resident of Canarsie, for example, who could not send his son to a

⁷⁸. How great that likelihood must be, I cannot say. This is an empirical question, not an analytic or normative one, and could best be resolved through either direct questions or perhaps historical analysis. For some partial discussions of this issue, see Jennifer L. Hochschild, What's Fair? (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Eli Chinoy, Auto Workers and the American Dream (New York: Random House, 1955); Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, The Hidden Injuries of Class (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).

⁷⁹. The reverse association may not hold; people may not worry about the fairness of opportunities to advance when they talk about progress unless they fear that they are being unfairly held back.

private college because scholarships were reserved for more needy students perceived this policy not as opening opportunities for disadvantaged children, but as preventing progress within his family: "I work hard for my money, but they are taking from me to give to someone else. This taking is killing the creativity of the middle class. We are terribly abused."⁸⁰ Quantitative evidence appears in most public opinion polls that ask the appropriate questions. The less people have themselves benefitted from the operation of equal opportunity, the more they fear its extension to others.⁸¹

I have elsewhere discussed how the American equation of progress and equal opportunity keeps the white working class from being willing to alleviate black poverty.⁸² Suffice it to say here that Lincoln's hesitation about freeing the slaves corresponds, albeit in less virulent circumstances, to modern politicians' hesitation about endorsing the policies and providing the money needed to open opportunities to poor blacks. The hidden assumptions that bind some Americans to an ideal despite their own failure in its terms inhibit its application to even less successful others. Once again, equal opportunity is neither a panacea nor a fraud; the very features that create its success for some prevent its success for others.

80. Rieder, Canarsie, p. 108. See also Hochschild, What's Fair?, p. 117.

81. For example, in 1976 40% of those with grade school educations thought "the civil rights people have been trying to push too fast," compared with 33% of college-educated respondents. Philip Converse et al., American Social Attitudes Data Sourcebook (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 84. Opposition to interventionist civil rights policies such as busing or affirmative action do not depend simply on income or self-interest otherwise defined. For two of the most recent discussions of symbolic racism and group conflict models, see Paul Sniderman and Philip Tetlock, "Symbolic Racism," Donald Kinder, "The Continuing American Dilemma," and Sniderman and Tetlock, "Reflections on American Racism," all in Journal of Social Issues 42, No. 2 (Summer 1986): 129-194. See also Lawrence Bobo, "Group Conflict, Prejudice, and the Paradox of Contemporary Racial Attitudes," in Phyllis Katz and Dalmas Taylor, eds. Eliminating Racism: Means and Controversies (New York: Plenum, forthcoming, 1987).

82. See Jennifer Hochschild, "Race, Class, Power, and the American Welfare State," in Amy Gutmann ed., Democracy and the Welfare State (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming 1987). See also Reed, "The Black Urban Regime" for a more structural discussion of why poor whites perceive direct trade-offs between themselves and poor blacks.

This defensive fear of people less fortunate than oneself is not unique to whites looking at blacks. Blacks themselves occasionally act similarly: see Peter Applebome, "Racial Tension Said to Underlie Cambodian's Death in Dallas," New York Times, August 2, 1983, p. A10. In trying to understand why the most prominent local Cambodian was killed by a black passerby, one fellow immigrant hypothesized, "Maybe it is jealousy. They think we will take their jobs. But it's not good for us to live with black people here." See also Carlyle Douglas, "Korean Merchants Are Target of Black Anger," New York Times, January 19, 1985, p. 23.

Social Darwinists: The Problem of a Free Market Ideology

Up to this point, we have seen contemporary versions of four of equal opportunity's mixed blessings identified in my whirlwind tour through American history. These were, in brief, the immigrants' demonstration that success for some members of a group may worsen the failure of others in that group, Croly's fear and the Yuppies' demonstration of the psychic dangers of being on the tails of the educational and socioeconomic distributions, and Lincoln's discovery that benefits to one group may harm another. The final problem, the resurgence of social Darwinism, is an ideological lens for viewing the other four phenomena, with the singular benefits (to its believers) of bringing the virtues of equal opportunity into focus and dropping its flaws from sight.

The argument is at base brief and straightforward: equal opportunity requires the public provision of prospect-regarding equality to all, but public efforts toward means-regarding equality for none.⁸³ That is, the government must eliminate all legal barriers to anyone's ability to rise (and presumably fall) through their own efforts, but the government may not (says Robert Nozick) or should not (says Charles Murray) do much more than that to change people's chances.⁸⁴ Equal opportunity means just that -- an identical "occasion" or "chance" for all.⁸⁵ Any intervention beyond that moves away from equal opportunity toward some other value.

This stripped-down ideology of equal opportunity is, on the one hand, liberating, for blacks perhaps more than for any other group. Its followers must promote civil rights legislation and decry psychological or statistical discrimination.⁸⁶ It can be a powerful breath of fresh air blowing through

⁸³. These terms are explicated (not briefly and perhaps not straightforwardly) in Rae et al., Equalities, chapter 4.

⁸⁴. Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Murray, Losing Ground.

⁸⁵. The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 1998.

⁸⁶. As indeed the heads of civil rights agencies in the Reagan administration do. See, for example, William Bradford Reynolds, "A Defense of the Reagan Administration's Civil Rights Policies," New Perspectives 16, No. 1 (Summer 1984):34-38.

The term "statistical discrimination" is intended to distinguish personal prejudice -- "I don't like blacks, so I won't hire one" -- or legal segregation from prejudicial behavior that stems from rational self-interest. If an employer knows that, on average, young blacks steal more from their bosses than young whites and that they have higher absentee rates and quit jobs more readily, he or she is acting rationally in hiring any given young white rather than young black job applicant. The problems, of course, are that what is true on average may not be true in particular cases, and that without a reasonable

paternalistic social service agencies. It fosters a spirit of entrepreneurial adventure and sheer excitement at the possibilities of life, and it can offset the tendency toward a victim mentality held too often by unsuccessful blacks and their white liberal supporters. Most important here, it reinforces the American belief in providing education for all children.

On the other hand, social Darwinism is oppressive. Uncontrolled markets reinforce inequalities, make a mockery of political equality, destroy those who find themselves for whatever reason at the bottom of the heap.

These observations are, to put it mildly, hardly new and certainly do not need to be dwelled upon.⁸⁷ I can add only two observations to the standard debate. The first is the proposition that modern social Darwinists are, at base, right, logically if not normatively. The logic of equal opportunity requires taking the bad with the good; absent a starting point of complete equality and total individualism,⁸⁸ a society cannot remedy the defects without sacrificing the joys of free markets. More pointedly, our society cannot eliminate the cumulative inequalities that prevent so many blacks from competing successfully in the opportunity structure without interfering much more than almost anybody wants in the workings of markets, schools, workplaces,

probability of attaining a job young blacks have no incentive to learn good work habits. Even social Darwinist conceptions of equal opportunity will find this phenomenon normatively disturbing, although social Darwinists may find government intervention to alleviate it even more disturbing. For an academic discussion of statistical discrimination, see Christopher Jencks, "Affirmative Action for Blacks," American Behavioral Scientist 28, No. 6 (July/August 1985): 731-760. For examples of its political force and volatility, see Richard Cohen, "Closing the Door on Crime," Washington Post Magazine, September 7, 1986, and articles in response such as Cohen, "Accused of Racism," Washington Post, September 14, 1984, p. D7, and "The Jeweler's Dilemma," symposium in The New Republic, November 10, 1986, pp. 18-25. See also Frances Marcus, "Louisiana Sheriff Backed after Racial Remark," New York Times, December 23, 1986, p. A17

⁸⁷. For critiques of Murray's empirical claims, see Christopher Jencks, "How Poor Are the Poor," New York Review of Books, May 9, 1985; Robert Greenstein, "Losing Faith in 'Losing Ground'," The New Republic, March 25, 1985:12-17; Sheldon Danziger and Peter Gottschalk, "The Poverty of Losing Ground," Challenge, May-June 1985. For recent critiques of Nozick's philosophical claims, see Ian Shapiro, The Evolution of Rights in Liberal Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), chapter 4; Michael Sandel, Liberalism and the Limits of Justice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), chapter 2; and Kai Nielson, Equality and Liberty (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allenheld, 1985), part IV.

⁸⁸. And perhaps not even then -- see Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia on Wilt Chamberlain.

real estate sales, and so on.⁸⁹ The often rather tortured arguments of proponents of "quotas" and "forced bussing" (whose values and visions I share) are mute testimony to this point. In short, the reincarnated social Darwinists of the 1980s, with their denunciations of most government activities in the name of freedom and rights, may be evil but they are not wrong. Equal opportunity both liberates and oppresses, for the same reason -- its insistence that providing individual occasion or chance impels some but constrains most government action.

My second observation is perhaps more important here: powerful political consequences flow from the fact that social Darwinism is resurgent at the same time that some blacks are escaping poverty and some whites are fearing that they will not escape it.⁹⁰ Social Darwinism provides an excellent ideological justification for self-protection, whether by newly-wealthy blacks or fearful whites. After all, if some blacks can attain a college education on their own (more or less), why can't others? Alternatively, if blacks are getting into college because of disproportionate aid from the government, why should they be aided more than equally poor and powerless whites? Better that everyone have the same opportunities, a circumstance which (in this view) is best achieved by eliminating special favors for some rather than adding more special favors for others. Finally, if some blacks are not making it educationally and otherwise because of unintended consequences of government intervention,⁹¹ all the more reason for government to wipe the slate clean and reinstate the pure form of equal opportunity.

These views may be empirically mistaken and mutually contradictory, but data and logic are mostly irrelevant when an ideology fits a problem so well. The upshot is that beneficiaries of the first four varieties of equal opportunity can use the fifth to explain and justify any discomfort they might feel about the losers.

⁸⁹. See Jennifer L. Hochschild, "Approaching Racial Inequality Through Indirection" Yale Law and Policy Review 4, No. 2 (Spring/Summer 1986):307- 330 for evidence on this claim in the case of school desegregation. See also Edwin Dorn, Rules and Racial Equality (Yale: Yale University Press, 1979) for a more analytic demonstration of this contention.

⁹⁰. This may not be a unique historical phenomenon, if the history of immigrant ethnic groups is analogous to the contemporary situation of blacks. After all, some Irish and Jews were escaping the slums, and some WASPs were fearing the new competition during the first social Darwinist era. However, the situation of blacks may not be analogous to that of white ethnics in the nineteenth century. For a more detailed discussion of that point, see Hochschild, "Race, Class, Power, and Liberal Democracy"; Dorn, Rules and Racial Equality, pp. 136-139; Reed, "The Black Urban Regime," and especially Lieberman, Piece of the Pie.

⁹¹. As Charles Murray, among others, asserts.

CAN WE BLUNT THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD?

I have argued that blacks are recapitulating in one generation the varieties of equal opportunity that whites have experienced over 150 years. Rather to my own surprise, I find the analytic implications of this contention clearer than the normative ones. The compression of all virtues and flaws of equal opportunity into one generation suggests why it is so difficult to get a clear picture of how the condition of blacks has changed in the last twenty years. Both those who point to dramatic achievements and those who insist on equally dramatic failures are right; both those who decry continuing white racism and those who point to declining prejudice are right. In short, the "race versus class" and "racism versus fairness" arguments are miscast; we can only understand the condition of black Americans by looking at the interactions among those phenomena rather than posing one against the other.

However, the normative implications of this contention are not clear. If it is right, we are unlikely to be able to retain the virtues of equal opportunity without its flaws.⁹² Is it worth it? The answer to that question depends, of course, on who is asked and what the alternatives are. Rather than embarking on that complicated discussion, I shall simply conclude with a few suggestions about how to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of equal opportunity.

In Who Governs? and elsewhere, Robert Dahl describes the conditions necessary for pluralism -- equal opportunity in the political realm -- to succeed.⁹³ By drawing selectively on that description, we can at least point to circumstances which promote the virtues of equal educational opportunity more than they promote its defects.

One condition is that of slack resources. Politically, that condition implies that blacks should look for circumstances in which their meager but real political resources of an increasing number of black mayors in central cities and black superintendents and senior administrators of school districts, black (and sympathetic white) teachers, and a growing black middle class can

⁹². I use the verb "unlikely to" rather than "cannot" to signal that at least some of the double-edged varieties of equal opportunity are empirical contingencies rather than analytic necessities. That is, increased inequality within a group is a necessary element of the operation of equal opportunity on a prior condition of equal poverty and oppression; the worsening in absolute as well as relative position of the worst-off while others are gaining is a contingent element, which might under some circumstances be avoided. Similarly, the virtues of a free market seem necessarily allied with its defects, but the phenomenon of virulent hatred for winners in the market system by some of its losers seems to be historically variable and thus not inevitable.

⁹³. Who Governs? (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

have the greatest leverage in improving the quality and reach of schooling.⁹⁴ Those circumstances will occur most clearly when the more resource-rich white political structure is disorganized or inefficient (e.g. Chicago after Mayor Daley), when ill-used black resources can be mobilized (e.g. voter registration drives in majority black electoral districts), or when whites do not perceive improving the quality of education for blacks to be detrimental to their own interests (e.g. magnet schools for high achievers).

Economically, the condition of slack resources implies that equal educational opportunity will work best for blacks in periods of general economic growth and perhaps in rapidly growing school districts, if for no other reason than that the more resources available to all, the less poor whites will see black achievement as a direct threat to their own well-being.⁹⁵ This point can be prescriptive as well as descriptive, if blacks are willing to move to those locations or send their children to those schools where growth seems most likely and/or resources are most available. It also suggests policy as well as individual prescriptions: poor urban or rural school districts should try to team up with wealthier suburban districts that are losing students (as in St. Louis or Kansas City). Finally, it suggests that it is in blacks' interest to promote policies that directly benefit poor and working-class whites, partly for trickle-down reasons and partly to relieve pressure on themselves.

A second condition for successful pluralism is dispersed resources. Any policy or activity that breaks down the cumulative inequalities of race, class, and power⁹⁶ helps the virtues of equal opportunity to outweigh its defects. For example, as some blacks attain discretionary income and middle-class skills, they can run for the local school board or use their resources on behalf of other black candidates.⁹⁷ Black superintendents can follow the well-worn path of their white ethnic predecessors by providing jobs for their fellow

⁹⁴. For evidence that the presence of blacks on school boards matters for the education of black students, see Kenneth J. Meier and Robert England, "Black Representation and Educational Policy," American Political Science Review 78 (June 1984): 392-403.

⁹⁵. Most generally, blacks have gained the most political, social, and economic ground during (some) periods of expansion, such as the 1860s-1870s and the 1940s-1960s. More specifically, programs that seek to attach poor or underclass blacks to the labor market are much more successful where the unemployment rate is very low (e.g. Massachusetts in the mid-1980s) than where it is high (e.g. California in the mid-1970s).

⁹⁶. For a discussion of the extent and changes in cumulative inequalities, see Jennifer Hochschild, "Race, Class, Power, and Equal Opportunity" in Norman Bowie, ed. Equal Opportunity (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, forthcoming 1987).

⁹⁷. For black candidates, as for white ones, the chances of electoral success rise dramatically with an increase in personal and supporters' resources. See Albert Karnig, "Black Representation on City Councils," Urban Affairs Quarterly 12, No. 12 (December 1976), p. 233.

ethnics,⁹⁸ and hopefully a better education as well. This process should not only disperse resources further, but might also provide inner city youth with evidence that blacks can make it in a white man's world. Thus middle class blacks might become slightly more secure about their good fortune and some poor blacks might be saved from underclass despair and anger.⁹⁹

A third element of successful pluralism in Who Governs? is separate spheres of influence for subsets of political actors. Perhaps blacks should seek resources and security by gaining control of and teaching in predominantly black school systems and by fostering and attending traditionally black colleges. This strategy is more controversial than the first two (and directly contradicts the second), since it flies in the face of thirty years of efforts to desegregate schools and faculties. But Who Governs? suggests that separate spheres of influence is an important mechanism for avoiding the growth of a power elite and for providing entry points into the political process for uninfluential citizens. A little more black separatism might allay black middle-class insecurities about being admitted to universities as tokens, soothe white working-class fears that blacks are taking over their schools and neighborhoods, and boost black youths' hope of using education to get onto the ladder of mobility.

Upon reflection, specifying the conditions for successful pluralism -- and by extension, other arenas of equal opportunity -- may not be very helpful. They may simply add up to the tautologous claim that when opportunities are extensive, expanding, and spread across the population, equal educational opportunity works better than when opportunities are few, diminishing, and concentrated. We knew that to begin with. Nevertheless this paper is offered with the hope, but not the conviction, that analytic clarity about the process of equal opportunity will produce normatively better outcomes.

⁹⁸. Peter Eisinger, "Black Employment in Municipal Jobs," American Political Science Review 76, No. 2(June 1982): 380-392.

⁹⁹. However, these accomplishments might come at the expense of exacerbating working-class white fears that their position in society is being eroded by new black competitors. How the relationships among the varieties of equal opportunity change is the subject for another paper.